

Bishop Sue Moxley • Advent 2 A Dec. 4, 2016  
150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of St. Mark's Church, Halifax

Happy Anniversary !

Looking back to the past

- Remembering the great events of the past
- Building the church building, rebuilding in a new location, additions, renovations
- Community events in which St. Mark's played a part
- Remembering the hard times of the past
- Remembering the great characters of this church
  - founders, family names, lay people who served as warden, organist, and lay reader
  - clergy who came, worked hard and moved on

Looking back helps us to remember that, through good times and bad, God has been faithful.

Anniversary also calls us to look to the future

- What future does God have in store for you?
- What is the mission of St. Mark's Church, Halifax, in this part of Nova Scotia?
- Who is God calling you to be as the people of God now? God has been faithful in the past. God will be faithful in the future! Will the people of this parish be faithful to God?

Looking forward may also help us to see how we may need to be renewed for the future into which God is calling us.

This congregation can look back and see how the faithfulness of your ancestors built this church and rebuilt it after the destruction by the explosion. I am certain that they gave thanks whenever they came here to worship God. One of the psalms says, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" There is this human need to have a place where we can go and be and recognize the presence of God. Virtually every culture has its sacred places. And this place is a sacred place. Generations of people have come here to worship Almighty God – to pray, to sing, to ask for God's forgiveness, to receive the Holy Communion, to be baptized, to be confirmed, to be married, to be buried.

(Ask how many in each category.)

This place is sacred - NOT because it is a church building, but because it is a place where God and God's people meet.

Without the meeting of God and God's people, the building becomes a museum, a beautiful old building, with beautiful old things inside, but no life. Museums are valuable to historians and people who want to look back.

BUT our church is NOT in the museum business! We are about a living faith, about being the children of God. We are about God's business of sharing love, forgiveness and eternal life. We are about God's mission to reconcile people to God. We are in the business of caring for the least of the brothers and sisters in our communities as Jesus told us.

We are to tell the story of God at work over the centuries and of God at work in our lives now! We gather here to hear the stories in the readings every Sunday. We gather here to hear an interpretation of the stories in the sermon. We gather here to relate our day-by-day stories and experiences to THE STORY of God in Jesus Christ.

If we are going to share God with others who have not heard the story of God's love as lived by Jesus, we have to learn our faith stories well. We share them so that others might be drawn to faith in Jesus Christ. That's why we have church buildings – places to gather to hear, to learn, to share in the life of Jesus Christ in the bread and the wine and to receive God's blessing. That's why we have congregations of faithful people - so that others will be drawn to God through us – we who are supposed to look like Jesus because we are His followers.

If we don't tell those stories, we are being unfaithful to God. If you don't tell the stories of God at work here in this community, there is no future for this congregation. If you spend all your time and money on the building without building the faith of the people of God in this congregation, then this will become a museum. We are NOT in the museum business!

Use your imagination – think of a beautiful fir tree; (Not hard- lots of them in Christmas tree lots!) Imagine it gets cut down and just a stump remains. If the roots are good, a shoot will appear and begin to stretch upward.

Tree stump image

- A brown stump of a dead tree
- new green shoot
- a branch that grows out of its roots.

Isaiah said:

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, a branch shall grow out of his root.”

It is an image of hope, of life out of death.

But what hope did Isaiah's people have? It must have seemed pretty unlikely to the people who heard Isaiah. Jesse the father of David was long since gone! As was David! The line of David seemed to have been destroyed. God's promise that there would always be a descendant of David on the throne of Israel, seemed to have fallen through. Part of the country was already defeated in war. Some of the people had been shipped off into exile.

Isaiah seemed to understand that it looked pretty hopeless for the people of God. He uses all those unlikely images to say so. However unlikely it seems that God is still with us, God is still with us! And God may do something totally new!

From the hopeless looking stump, comes the new green shoot. Who would have thought that a tree stump could be a sign of hope? Yet there it is!

Every congregation goes through exciting times and also goes through times of despairing about the future. St. Mark's has been through many of those up's and down's. In the down times someone has always heard the voice of hope

Paul would later remind his congregation in Rome about Isaiah's promise of hope – isaiah's voice, Paul's voice:

“4. For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope...

12. and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come...; in him the Gentiles shall hope

There is that shoot from the stump again along with hope. We Christians understand that - that new life that comes out of death! And that is our source of hope in a world that is just as crazy as the one in which Isaiah, or Paul or John the Baptist lived!

For John the Baptist, his homeland was occupied by the Romans. The Romans were keeping the people in submission with imposed laws and brute force. Some of the people tried to find hope in this desperate situation by joining forces with the Romans to try to make the best of it.

Some tried to sustain their faith by isolating themselves and attempting to keep all the details of the Law, in the hope that God might reward them. But many of the people had just given up on their faith - God appeared to have deserted them.

Into this scene of desperation, comes a voice of hope! That voice says that if you repent and return to the Lord, you will be pardoned and restored to a loving relationship with God. The sign of repentance was baptism. The voice was John the Baptist. It was such a

voice of hope that Matthew tells us “the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him.”

But then Matthew tells us that some were going, not seeking forgiveness, but claiming to have their own hope because they were descended from Abraham. Remember that tree stump from Isaiah? John the Baptist says, “Even now the axe is lying at the root of the tree ...”

Even though it is clearly a threat, we can still hear a message of hope because we know about the shoot that can spring up even from a dead looking stump!

So

Hope can come from knowing our Scripture and remembering God’s promises.

Hope can come from our faith in Jesus Christ.

Hope can come from repentance (turning our disobedient hearts back to God) knowing Christ’s promise that we will be forgiven.

God calls us to be a hope-filled people!

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that the people of St. Mark’s may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Happy Anniversary!